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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: June 5, 2007

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State Adopts Stricter Approach to Protecting Pet Health,
Offers Guidelines for Adopting Healthy Pets

BOSTON – The state Dept. of Agricultural Resources (DAR) today announced that PawSafe Animal Rescue, a pet rescue organization previously based in Medford, and Dr. Rodney Poling, a veterinarian who offers rescue puppies for sale at Holliston Meadows Pet Resort in Holliston, must follow new protocols designed to prevent recurrence of health problems among puppies offered for adoption or sale in Massachusetts.

The DAR's action came after a several-week investigation into consumer complaints associated with puppies brought to Massachusetts from other states by PawSafe. The investigation involved puppies offered for adoption by PawSafe and for sale by Holliston Meadows. Several of these puppies became sick with parvovirus and other ailments after being adopted, and several subsequently died or were euthanized due to parvo. Parvo is a highly contagious and sometimes fatal disease that causes extreme damage to the intestinal tract. Spread through contaminated cages, food dishes, and other means, it affects puppies much more often than adult dogs. Multiple vaccines may be necessary to ensure adequate protection.

DAR's Bureau of Animal Health delivered an Administrative Order detailing the new conditions for Holliston Meadows at a June 1 meeting with Poling. The department had planned to provide Diane Scuderi, operator of PawSafe, with a similar Order, but Scuderi informed DAR that her organization has moved out of Massachusetts. Bureau of Animal Health Director Brad Mitchell said PawSafe is prohibited from operating in the Commonwealth until a meeting takes place, and then may only operate under provisions similar to those put in place for Holliston Meadows.

The state came up with new protocols for Holliston Meadows and PawSafe after concluding that they did not take proper steps to ensure the health of puppies in their care. PawSafe is a rescue operation that imported puppies from out-of-state shelters. Holliston Meadows sells shelter puppies and operates a Milford facility (Rescue Care Center) where puppies brought in from other states are isolated before being offered for adoption by rescues such as PawSafe.

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In addition to the stricter standards announced today, DAR added parvo, distemper and several other companion animal illnesses to its Reportable Disease List. All pet shops, animal shelters, rescue organizations, veterinarians and laboratories must now report to state officials the likely occurrence of these diseases within a set time period. Also added were outbreaks of respiratory, gastrointestinal and skin diseases, which can be difficult to control in shelters.

With the exception of dogs surrendered by owners in contiguous states (New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, and Vermont), DAR regulations require that animals brought into Massachusetts from other states be isolated for 48 hours and determined by a veterinarian to be disease-free before being offered for sale or adoption. New protocols contained in the Holliston Meadows Administrative Order require the pet shop to isolate animals for an additional five days – a total of seven.

Also, out-of-state rescue dogs offered for sale or adoption by Holliston Meadows must receive a joint parvo/distemper vaccine (two shots, at least two weeks apart) before being transported to Massachusetts. And, while the statewide minimum adoption age for puppies is eight weeks, the state upped the minimum age to 16 weeks for Holliston Meadows to ensure that puppies' immune systems are more mature and better able to combat disease before they move to new homes.

“For the vast majority of shelters, rescue operators and pet shops, the state’s existing regulations provide adequate protection for pets and pet owners,” Mitchell said. “Although our announcement today is aimed at preventing recurring problems associated specifically with these two entities, it presents an opportunity to offer some general guidelines for consumers considering pet adoption.”

Mitchell said potential pet owners should only purchase or adopt pets from reputable sources that comply with Massachusetts laws and regulations. All Massachusetts pet shops must be licensed by the state and display their license in a location visible to customers. Information about purchasing from pet shops is available on the DAR’s web site:

http://www.mass.gov/agr/animalhealth/petshops/buying_a_dog.htm.

As a general rule, Mitchell said, consumers should adopt pets in person, not over the Internet. Similarly, he warned against adopting pets from rescue organizations that operate out of trucks or other vehicles, since this indicates that pets on board have been recently transported and probably have not undergone the 48-hour isolation designed to detect disease. To safeguard against disease, consumers adopting from a shelter facility should make sure the shelter is registered with DAR (a list of registered shelters can be viewed at <http://www.mass.gov/agr/animalhealth/ApprovedEntities.htm>). Consumers should also obtain their potential pet’s complete medical history. Once adopted, new pets should be segregated from other household pets for 48 hours to allow time for them to adapt to their new environment and to protect their health and the health of other animals in the home. Owners should make an appointment for the new pet to be seen by a veterinarian as soon as possible.

Consumers who encounter pet sale or adoption problems should contact DAR at 617-626-1795, or the Attorney General’s Consumer Complaint Line at 617-727-8400.

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